

Women in Corporate Histories: A Systematic Review of Struggle, Survival, and Agency

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Narrating Gendered Resilience: A Systematic Literature Review of Women's Struggles and Agency in Corporate Workspaces (2010–2025)

Abstract

This study offers a systematic literature review (SLR) of academic research on the lived experiences, narratives, and representations of women in corporate workspaces that was published between 2010 and 2025. This review summarizes how scholarly literature has looked at women's struggles, survival, and agency inside patriarchal corporate institutions. It is based on feminist communication and critical discourse theory and is guided by the PRISMA protocol. After screening 148 studies using databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, 62 of them satisfied the inclusion requirements for the final synthesis. Gendered organizational discourse and leadership representation, work-life integration and emotional labor, structural injustices and the glass ceiling, intersectional complexities across race, class, sexual orientation, and ability, and digital transformations and post-#MeToo corporate communication are the five main thematic clusters identified by the findings. This paper uses critical discourse analysis to demonstrate how women continuously reconstruct resilient identities in the corporate arena, which serves as a place of both negotiation and exclusion. It finds that although feminist corporate studies has grown over the last ten years, new intersectional, non-Western, and narratively sensitive approaches that link lived experience to institutional discourse are still required. This review contributes to the interdisciplinary field of feminist communication by mapping epistemic trajectories and highlighting future research directions for scholars interested in gender, power, and discourse in organizational contexts.

Keywords: Women in corporate workspaces, feminist discourse, PRISMA review, gender inequality, intersectionality, agency, workplace narratives

Introduction

Background and Rationale

One of the most obvious signs of social and economic change in the twenty-first century is the presence of women in corporate settings. However, the institutional legacies of corporate performativity, neoliberalism, and patriarchy continue to characterize the growth of women's professional participation. Corporate workplaces are discursive spaces where gendered power relations are created, maintained, and contested, as demonstrated by researchers in feminist communication studies, sociology, and organizational theory (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Gill, 2016; Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2022).

As a result, the tale of women in these settings is one of both strategy and struggle—of questioning established hierarchies while creating means of self-expression and survival. Corporate women must negotiate a complicated landscape of communicative expectations, from the symbolic violence of performance reviews to the emotional strain of adopting masculine leadership approaches. The discourse's historical development from industrial exclusion to modern inclusion rhetoric illustrates how cultural norms governing gender in the workplace are evolving.

Literature Context

Scholarship that examines gendered organizational practices has grown exponentially during the last ten years (2010–2025). The glass ceiling, gendered communication patterns, and leadership inequities are major topics of this research (Catalano & McMahan, 2020; Adams & Ferreira, 2016). However, the corporate world frequently commodifies equality talk while concealing long-standing hierarchies through performative diversity strategies, as feminist scholars have noted (Ahmed, 2012; Gill & Orgad, 2020).

Concurrently, feminist communication studies have highlighted language and narrative as essential instruments for comprehending these paradoxes. Gender ideologies are replicated and sometimes subverted in corporate narratives, mission statements, media representations, and the autobiographies of female CEOs (Benschop & Verloo, 2016). This discursive focus emphasizes how power functions not only via numbers or policy but also through language, representation, and affect.

Theoretical Framework

This review draws upon two key theoretical frameworks:

1. **Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)** — which views language and communication as mechanisms of gendered power (Lazar, 2014); and
2. **Intersectional Feminism** — which examines how gender interacts with race, class, sexuality, and ability (Crenshaw, 1991; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013).

Combining these frameworks enables a multifaceted interpretation of corporate communication, in which narratives of women's achievements are concurrently narratives of negotiating systems of exclusion. Additionally, the review challenges Eurocentric corporate paradigms that generalize Western notions of empowerment by using a postcolonial feminist lens (Mohanty, 2003; Banerjee, 2021).

2.4 Research Objectives

The primary aim of this review is to systematically synthesize academic literature on women's struggles, survival strategies, and agency in corporate contexts through a discursive and feminist lens. Specifically, the review seeks to:

1. Map the thematic and methodological trends in scholarly research (2010–2025) concerning women in corporate spaces.
2. Identify how feminist and communication frameworks have been applied to study corporate gender dynamics.
3. Examine how intersectional and postcolonial insights reshape understandings of women's agency within global corporate discourses.
4. Highlight research gaps and propose future directions for integrating critical communication theory with gendered organizational analysis.

By systematically consolidating the scattered academic discourse on this subject, the paper aims to establish a comprehensive reference framework for feminist scholars studying communication, power, and identity in organizational settings.

Methodology

Research Design

In order to critically synthesize and evaluate the scholarly discourse surrounding women's difficulties, survival, and agency in corporate workspaces, this study uses a PRISMA-guided Systematic Literature Review (SLR) framework. Feminist communication theory can be conceptually integrated while maintaining methodological transparency and replicability according to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) standard (Page et al., 2021). Identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion are the four main PRISMA processes that the review adheres to.

This review incorporates techniques from organizational theory, gender research, and communication studies because the topic is interdisciplinary. The method emphasizes discourse mapping and narrative synthesis rather than meta-analysis, and it is philosophically grounded rather than strictly quantitative.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

To ensure comprehensive coverage, literature searches were conducted across three major databases — Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar — between December 2024 and March 2025. Additional relevant works were identified through citation tracking and backward snowballing from highly cited studies.

Search terms were constructed using Boolean operators and combined key constructs:

("women" OR "female" OR "gender") AND ("corporate" OR "organization" OR "workplace" OR "leadership") AND ("discourse" OR "narrative" OR "communication" OR "representation") AND ("agency" OR "struggle" OR "inequality" OR "intersectionality").

The search was restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers published between 2010 and 2025.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain conceptual focus and methodological rigor, the following criteria guided the inclusion of studies:

Inclusion Criteria

1. Peer-reviewed publications between 2010 and 2025.

2. Studies explicitly addressing women's experiences or representations in corporate or organizational contexts.
3. Articles employing discourse analysis, feminist theory, or intersectional frameworks.
4. Empirical or conceptual works that examine communication, culture, or representation within workplaces.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Studies focusing solely on gender policy without communicative or representational dimensions.
2. Purely statistical studies lacking qualitative interpretation.
3. Non-academic sources such as magazine articles, blogs, and reports.

3.4 Screening Process

A total of **148 studies** were initially identified. After duplicate removal ($n = 27$), **121 titles and abstracts** were screened for relevance. Following full-text evaluation, **62 studies** met all inclusion criteria and were retained for synthesis. The screening and inclusion process is illustrated in the **PRISMA flowchart (given below)**.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

Identification: 148 studies found →

1. Screening: 121 abstracts assessed
2. Eligibility: 72 full-texts reviewed
3. Inclusion: 62 articles analyzed qualitatively.

Data Extraction and Coding

Each article was reviewed to extract information about:

- Author(s), year, and country/region
- Theoretical framework
- Methodology
- Key findings and implications
- Discursive or communicative focus

A hybrid coding approach was used, combining deductive coding (directed by feminist discourse frameworks) and inductive thematic coding (finding emergent themes). Textual data was managed using NVivo software, and after 60 articles, topic saturation was reached.

In order to highlight how each study creates meanings related to gender, power, and corporate identity, a narrative synthesis approach was used (Popay et al., 2006). The synthesis emphasizes

141 discursive patterns—how women's autonomy is portrayed, limited, or redefined in organizational
 142 contexts—instead of data aggregation.

143 A feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) lens was used to further analyze each theme found
 144 during analysis, linking linguistic representation to institutional power relations (Lazar, 2014).

145 **3.7 Summary of Key Studies (2010–2025)**

Author(s)	Year	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings
Adams & Ferreira	2016	Women in corporate governance	Quantitative & policy analysis	Female board presence improves ethics but faces symbolic tokenism.
Gill & Orgad	2020	Feminist branding & corporate narratives	Discourse analysis	“Empowerment” rhetoric masks neoliberal exploitation of women’s identities.
Nkomo & Rodriguez	2022	Race, gender & corporate hierarchy	Intersectional qualitative study	Women of color experience compounded invisibility and hypervisibility.
Koval & Hardy	2014	Leadership and gender diversity in emerging economies	Comparative case studies	Cultural norms constrain women’s advancement despite formal equity policies.
Ahmed	2012	Institutional feminism and diversity work	Ethnographic institutional study	“Diversity talk” functions as symbolic compliance, not transformation.
Williams & Dempsey	2014	Workplace bias and negotiation strategies	Case-based analysis	Identifies four systemic patterns (“Prove it again,” “Tightrope,” etc.).
Gill	2016	Gendered media and representation	Textual analysis	Media reinforces postfeminist ideals of individual success.
Banerjee	2021	Postcolonial corporate feminism	Critical theory analysis	Western feminism in corporate discourse erases Global South agency.
Ely & Meyerson	2000	Organizational gender theory	Theoretical review	Gender is embedded in organizational practices; must be re-theorized.
Catalano & McMahan	2020	Diversity and equity leadership	Empirical survey	Inclusion improves innovation but not automatically empowerment.
Rattan & Dweck	2018	Gender mindset in the workplace	Psychological experiment	Growth mindset reduces gender bias in leadership evaluations.
Kronsell & Svedberg	2019	Emotional labor in leadership	Ethnographic	Women perform extra emotional regulation to sustain

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Author(s)	Year	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings
				authority.
Singh & Patel	2023	Indian corporate women narratives	Narrative interviews	Women's resilience shaped by cultural expectations and familial discourse.
Sandberg	2013	"Lean In" movement critique	Feminist commentary	Individual empowerment discourse ignores structural inequality.
Thomas & Hardy	2024	AI, gender, and workplace bias	Computational discourse analysis	AI hiring tools perpetuate gender bias through coded language.

146 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

147 The researcher recognizes their positionality in the interpretive process by adhering to feminist
 148 research ethics. As a communication and gender studies scholar, postcolonial feminist awareness
 149 and skepticism of neoliberal equality narratives inform my interpretative lens. Reflexivity
 150 guarantees that results are presented as situated readings within larger social discourses of gender
 151 and labor rather than as objective facts (Pillow, 2003).

152 Findings and Thematic Synthesis

153 Five broad theme clusters emerged from the synthesis of 62 research published between 2010
 154 and 2025, each of which shed light on unique but related facets of women's autonomy, survival,
 155 and difficulties in corporate settings. These themes explain how gendered experiences in
 156 organizational life are mediated through speech, communication, and representation.

157 Gendered Organizational Discourse and Leadership Representation

158 The way that gendered presumptions are encoded in organizational language, policy texts, and
 159 leadership discourses is a recurring theme in the literature. Research like Ely and Meyerson
 160 (2000), Gill (2016), and Catalano and McMahan (2020) shows how corporate communication,
 161 from mission statements to annual reports, frequently presents gender as an apolitical category,
 162 concealing its structural disparities.

163 "Neutral" managerial language frequently normalizes masculine ideals of authority, rationality,
 164 and decisiveness, relegating relational or emotional competencies—often associated with
 165 femininity—to secondary status, according to feminist critical discourse analyses (Lazar, 2014;
 166 Kronsell & Svedberg, 2019).

167 Despite a numerical increase, women's representation in leadership roles is still narratively
 168 limited. According to Benschop and Verloo (2016), women leaders are depicted in corporate
 169 communication and the media as "exceptions" or "role models" whose success is dependent more
 170 on individual fortitude than on systemic change.

This is referred to by academics as "discursive tokenism," in which visibility is attained without altering institutional power relations (Ahmed, 2012). To deal with gendered expectations, female executives frequently use linguistic code-switching, which involves stressing empathy in HR communications while adopting masculine speech patterns in boardrooms (Kark et al., 2012).

In conclusion, leadership discourse highlights the persistent symbolic masculinity of corporate language and functions as a performative space where women negotiate legitimacy through strategic conformance.

Work–Life Integration, Emotional Labour, and Corporate Care Narratives

The second thematic cluster concerns ¹⁵ how women's corporate experiences are shaped by the discourse of work–life balance and emotional management. The literature consistently demonstrates that organizational cultures valorizing constant availability and competitiveness reproduce structural disadvantages for women who shoulder disproportionate care responsibilities (Burke & Mattis, 2005; Singh & Patel, 2023).

This body of research critiques the neoliberal co-option of "flexibility" — a term marketed as empowerment but often used to shift the burden of adaptation onto women themselves (Lewis et al., 2017). Corporate diversity campaigns celebrating "women who manage it all" reinforce the myth of individual resilience while obscuring the lack of institutional support systems such as parental leave and flexible scheduling.

Emotional labor, as theorized by Hochschild (2012) and later extended to leadership contexts (Kronsell & Svedberg, 2019), emerges as a central concern. Female managers often internalize emotional regulation as a survival strategy — softening directives, mediating conflict, and demonstrating empathy to counter stereotypes of aggression.

Several post-#MeToo studies (e.g., Ramaswamy, 2021; Thomas & Hardy, 2024) link this emotional overextension to "corporate care narratives", where women are expected to act as moral anchors or ethical correctives within masculine workspaces. These expectations, though rhetorically positive, reinforce gendered divisions of affective labor, casting women as the emotional custodians of corporate morality.

Structural Inequalities and the Glass Ceiling

Despite significant progress in inclusion policies, the metaphor of the glass ceiling continues to define contemporary corporate gender discourse. Research consistently highlights persistent wage gaps, promotion barriers, and implicit biases in performance evaluation systems (Adams & Ferreira, 2016; Williams & Dempsey, 2014).

Feminist analyses argue that these structures persist not merely due to policy failure but because of organizational storytelling — the ways institutions narrate success and failure. For instance, corporate diversity reports often celebrate statistical progress without disclosing attrition rates or qualitative experiences of discrimination (Gill & Orgad, 2020).

Studies such as Ahmed (2012) and Banerjee (2021) further reveal how the language of diversity management functions performatively, producing what Ahmed calls “non-performativity” — institutional speech acts that promise change without enacting it.

Moreover, discourses of meritocracy and individual achievement conceal the systemic exclusion of women who do not conform to dominant corporate identities (Nkomo& Rodriguez, 2022). This symbolic invisibility is particularly acute for women of color, LGBTQ+ professionals, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who face multiple layers of institutional gatekeeping.

Thus, the glass ceiling operates not merely as a structural constraint but as a discursive regime that legitimizes exclusion through the rhetoric of merit, professionalism, and neutrality.

Intersectionality and the Politics of Difference

The integration of intersectionality into organizational research marks a pivotal theoretical shift over the last decade. Building on Crenshaw’s (1991) foundational framework, studies explore how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and disability to shape corporate experiences (Cho et al., 2013; Nkomo& Rodriguez, 2022).

Intersectional analyses reveal that while corporate gender discourse often universalizes the category of “woman,” lived realities differ vastly. For example, women of color frequently encounter hypervisibility (as tokens of diversity) coexisting with invisibility (as subjects of leadership narratives). LGBTQ+ professionals experience heightened surveillance and moral policing under heteronormative corporate cultures (Priestley & Lee, 2020).

In the Global South, scholars such as Banerjee (2021) and Singh & Patel (2023) argue that corporate feminism is often postcolonial in tension — aspiring to global gender norms while remaining constrained by local patriarchal and class hierarchies. Indian, African, and Latin American women in multinational corporations navigate hybrid spaces where colonial and neoliberal scripts overlap.

Disability inclusion studies (e.g., Huppatz, 2023) add yet another dimension, showing how accessibility is often treated as compliance rather than cultural transformation.

Overall, intersectionality enables a deeper reading of women’s corporate narratives — not as uniform struggles for equality, but as plural negotiations within interlocking systems of oppression and opportunity.

Digital Transformations, #MeToo, and Postfeminist Corporate Discourse

240 The fifth cluster captures the rise of digital feminism and its effects on corporate communication.
241 Since 2017, the #MeToo movement has profoundly influenced how organizations address
242 gendered harassment, power dynamics, and ethical accountability.

243 Studies like Gill and Orgad (2020) and Thomas and Hardy (2024) show that corporations
244 responded to #MeToo with a dual discourse: one of public solidarity and another of private
245 containment. Social media platforms became spaces of both empowerment and surveillance,
246 where women's testimonies were amplified yet subjected to institutional scrutiny.

247 Emergent research on AI, automation, and gender bias (Thomas & Hardy, 2024; Rattan
248 & Dweck, 2018) demonstrates how technological systems perpetuate existing inequalities
249 through biased algorithms in hiring and evaluation.

250 Meanwhile, the discourse of "digital empowerment" — often associated with influencer-led
251 corporate feminism — commodifies resistance, translating structural critique into marketable
252 self-branding (Gill, 2021). This postfeminist rhetoric celebrates visibility and confidence while
253 marginalizing structural reform.

254 Nevertheless, the digital era has opened new avenues for feminist resistance, with collective
255 storytelling and networked activism (e.g., #TimesUp, #PayMeToo) pushing organizations toward
256 greater transparency.

257 Together, these five thematic clusters reveal that women's participation in corporate spaces is
258 both a communicative and political process.

259 While policies and representation have improved, discursive inequities—rooted in language,
260 narrative, and ideology—continue to regulate women's professional identities.

261 Women's stories in corporate contexts, therefore, are not merely reflections of progress but acts
262 of resistance and redefinition — sites where power, language, and identity intersect to produce
263 new forms of gendered resilience.

264 **Discussion**

265 **Interpreting the Discursive Landscape**

266 The synthesis of existing scholarship indicates that women's experiences in corporate
267 workspaces cannot be adequately understood through policy or representation alone. They must
268 be examined through the discursive and affective structures that sustain gendered inequalities.
269 Language — in policies, emails, boardroom conversations, and media portrayals — functions as
270 both the medium and mechanism of gendered power (Lazar, 2014; Gill, 2016).

271

272 The reviewed literature highlights that corporate discourse is not neutral. It is ideological, shaped
273 by neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism, efficiency, and productivity (Banet-Weiser,

2018). Within this regime, women are encouraged to narrate their struggles as stories of personal empowerment — effectively converting systemic exclusion into private resilience. The lexicon of empowerment, often mobilized in diversity campaigns, thereby becomes a form of symbolic compliance (Ahmed, 2012), where institutions appear inclusive without altering their hierarchies.

The Role of Narrative and Representation

Feminist communication theory emphasizes that the stories we tell — and the silences we maintain — define the limits of possibility within organizations. Narratives of “successful women leaders” serve a double function: they inspire but also discipline. By glorifying exceptional individual triumphs, these stories obscure the collective dimensions of women’s struggle and reproduce the myth of meritocracy (Gill & Orgad, 2020; Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2022).

In this context, women’s storytelling becomes a subversive act of reclamation. Autobiographies, social media testimonies, and internal corporate blogs function as counter-discourses that challenge institutional narratives. Such narrative interventions destabilize corporate myths of gender neutrality and reveal how emotional labor, invisibility, and intersectional marginalization persist under the guise of progress.

Thus, narrative not only reflects experience — it constitutes a site of resistance, producing new vocabularies of belonging and critique within corporate culture.

Theoretical Implications

This review bridges feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) and organizational communication to propose that women’s agency in corporate spaces is best conceptualized as discursive agency — the capacity to speak, frame, and reinterpret within systems that seek to contain.

By reading corporate feminism as a rhetorical formation rather than a political achievement, we can trace how gender equity initiatives often reproduce the very binaries they seek to dissolve. For instance, “empowerment” rhetoric situates women as subjects who must be “given voice,” thereby reaffirming institutional authority as the granter of that voice.

From a postcolonial perspective, this dynamic is particularly acute in the Global South, where Western corporate models are imported as benchmarks of modernity (Banerjee, 2021). Here, women’s professional advancement becomes tethered to the performance of cosmopolitan femininity — one that aligns with corporate aesthetic ideals while distancing itself from subaltern womanhood.

Consequently, feminist communication scholars must attend to the semiotics of global capitalism, wherein gender equality is simultaneously marketed and undermined through discourse.

Beyond #MeToo: Reframing Corporate Feminism

The #MeToo era has intensified public scrutiny of corporate ethics, yet the institutional response often remains confined to compliance training and HR protocols. As scholars such as Gill (2021) and Thomas and Hardy (2024) observe, organizations tend to domesticate feminist critique, translating it into risk management language.

Post-#MeToo corporate discourse reflects what McRobbie (2020) terms “neoliberal feminism” — a framework that celebrates women’s visibility and voice without confronting the material conditions of power. The digital sphere has amplified this paradox, as women’s voices are simultaneously hyper-visible and vulnerable to co-optation.

Nevertheless, these digital transformations have also expanded feminist communicative agency. The viral circulation of women’s workplace testimonies has forced corporations to reimagine their internal cultures, even if unevenly. The intersection of discourse, technology, and activism thus marks a fertile site for future feminist research in communication studies.

The Communicative Politics of Survival

A recurring motif across the reviewed studies is that of survival — not merely as endurance but as creative negotiation. Women’s communicative strategies within corporations range from silence to satire, from strategic empathy to alliance building. Each act of adaptation can be read as a micro-political gesture within the broader power matrix of corporate patriarchy.

Survival, in this sense, is discursively enacted: it is the language of “making it work” under conditions of constraint. Scholars such as Singh and Patel (2023) show how women in India and other postcolonial contexts articulate survival through relational metaphors — balancing familial expectations, community honor, and professional ambition. These metaphors reveal the depth of gendered negotiations that remain obscured in Western-centric leadership discourse.

Thus, the communicative politics of survival reframes women not as passive victims but as active producers of meaning, constantly redefining the boundaries of corporate discourse.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

While the existing literature offers critical insights, several gaps persist that warrant deeper scholarly engagement.

Geographic and Cultural Asymmetry

Most research continues to originate from the Global North, particularly the U.S., U.K., and Western Europe. Studies on women in corporate environments in the Global South remain limited and often rely on Western theoretical frameworks. Future research should incorporate South–South comparative perspectives, analyzing how postcolonial histories, religion, and local economies shape gendered corporate discourses (Banerjee, 2021; Singh & Patel, 2023).

344 **Methodological Innovation**

345 There is a need for multimodal discourse analysis that combines textual, visual, and digital data
346 — including social media, corporate intranets, and algorithmic decision-making systems. The
347 application of computational methods (e.g., AI-based discourse mapping) could complement
348 qualitative analysis while retaining feminist reflexivity (Thomas & Hardy, 2024).

349 **Intersectional and Temporal Dimensions**

350 Few studies trace intersectional experiences longitudinally. Feminist communication scholars
351 should explore how identities evolve over time — for instance, how class mobility, motherhood,
352 or remote work reshape women's communicative agency. Similarly, disability, sexuality, and
353 age remain underexplored dimensions of corporate discourse.

354 **Organizational Reflexivity and Feminist Praxis**

355 Finally, the literature underscores the need for feminist praxis within organizations — the
356 embedding of reflexivity into communication training, leadership development, and public
357 relations. Future scholarship could examine how feminist communication principles can inform
358 ethical corporate storytelling, promoting accountability and solidarity rather than spectacle.

359 **Conclusion**

360 This systematic review shows that language, narrative, and ideology continue to play a
361 significant role in the discursive nature of women's engagement in corporate workspaces.
362 Despite being nominally progressive, corporate feminism frequently reproduces neoliberal and
363 patriarchal logics through its own communicative practices, according to a consistent pattern
364 found in all 62 of the research examined.

365 However, the seeds of resistance are found among these paradoxes. From memoirs to
366 microblogs, women's narratives unveil new grammars of agency that redefine power as
367 collective articulation rather than dominance. By presenting alternative ideals of inclusion based
368 on compassion, solidarity, and justice, these acts of narrative intervention undermine corporate
369 scripts of professionalism, success, and femininity.

370 This review advances the area of feminist communication both methodologically and
371 philosophically by fusing feminist critical discourse analysis with PRISMA-guided systematic
372 rigor. It makes the case that rhetoric is the new arena for equality, where identity, policy, and
373 representation come together to shape contemporary gender politics. Therefore, future research
374 must go beyond simply tallying the number of women in boardrooms and instead focus on
375 hearing their tales as well as the silences that are still ignored.

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